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Freedom's A Struggle for Soviet Defector
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Alexander Sakharov says he lives to write but could not write where he lived. There was no place in the Soviet Union for his non-Marxist views, he said.

So on March 17, 1981, while working as an information officer with the Soviet mission to the United Nations in New York City, Alexander Artem Sakharov defected, taking his young daughter and pregnant wife to the U.S. mission.

For Sakharov, it was the start of a 20-month nightmare. The 34-year-old defector today is unpublished, unemployed and on welfare. Baffled and suspicious because of his failure to find work, he says he would welcome a job sweeping streets.

Intense and often agitated as he leaned across a card table in a starkly furnished apartment in this little town 30 miles northeast of San Francisco, Sakharov spoke of his reasons for defecting. It was a story of what can happen to the non-celebrity defector.

Sakharov, who is no relation to dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov, said he had hoped his four-year tour of duty with the Soviet U.N. delegation would give him time to finish his English-language novel.

"My life is my writing," he said, "and I would gladly sacrifice my life for the sake of my writing, because without it, my life is worthless."

But Sakharov said he became upset by "corruption, extortion, blackmail and a most unhealthy climate" at the Soviet mission. He says officials took furniture money meant for the entire delegation, leaving others with shoddy goods that included castoffs scavenged from New York dumps.

Sakharov said he received no support when he reported the matter to Moscow. "Perhaps it was a little bit early in terms of my literary plans, but still I could not stand the situation any longer," he said.

Encouraged by American acquaintances who suggested he might find work as a college lecturer or translator in the United States, he defected.

The FBI questioned him for several days, Sakharov said. On March 24, 1981, he was granted asylum and was taken to Washington for questioning by the State Department and the CIA.

The FBI was helpful, Sakharov said. But the CIA questioners "were asking me idiotic questions, absolutely idiotic," he added.

Sakharov plainly believes the CIA wanted him to work as an agent. He said some of his questioners threatened to send him back to the Soviets if he didn't cooperate and he suggested that the spy agency has scuttled his job opportunities to try to force him to comply.

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When asked about Sakharov's allegations, State Department spokesman Joe Reap and CIA spokesman Dale Peterson refused to discuss the case. Repeated efforts to get government comment failed.

Sakharov said he had hoped to stay and work in New York. Instead, he said, government officials told him in May 1981 that he was moving.

"They said I'll have to leave very urgently, I'm going to the West Coast, where I have been given a position at UC Berkeley, that all arrangements have been made, that people are waiting for me, that the house is rented for me and that I'm getting a job," he said.

But when he and his wife, who was 8 1/2 months pregnant, arrived in San Francisco, he said, "There was no job. There was no medical assistance. There was nothing."

He turned to the Tolstoy Foundation, which helps resettle refugees. He said he was put up in a shabby hotel and told he would have to pay for his wife's care.

"They sent him out to San Francisco, where he didn't know a soul, to an agency which didn't even have his file," said Alan Dundes, an anthropology professor at the University of California at Berkeley who had met Sakharov in Moscow and wound up helping him off-and-on for a year.

Linda Metaxas, local director of the Tolstoy Foundation, said she couldn't discuss Sakharov's case but noted that few refugees have jobs waiting for them.

Unwisely, Sakharov took a \$100-a-night room at the El Cortez Hotel and soon ran out of money. His wife gave birth to a second daughter.

Desperate, he took a taxi to Berkeley to find Dundes, who helped him rent a house and look for work and lent him money.

Sakharov said jobs seemed likely at Berkeley, at UCLA and at institutes in Monterey and La Jolla when "suddenly everything went wrong."

Dundes, however, said Sakharov "doesn't understand that when somebody says, 'We'll look into it' ... that's not a real job." But even real jobs seemed to evaporate around him.

A San Francisco translation job was lost when the client demanded someone less "political." A Pakistani group asked him to translate the Koran, then ran out of money, he said. A scheduled business lecture in London was lost, he said, when Sakharov's U.S. travel documents were delayed.

Dundes said Sakharov had failed to follow up on some job prospects, splurged on taxis and expensive food for his children and seemed "very idealistic and unrealistic about American life." He said immigrants like Sakharov "come from a society where things are provided for them."

"I'm not happy about living at the expense of American taxpayers," Sakharov said. "I have come to this country not to gain a better material position than in the Soviet Union. The most important thing for me is the ability to say what I want."